

Jerry Brown Made Climate Change His Issue. Now, He's Not Sure How Much Politicians Can Do.

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Highlight: The California governor, set to retire in January, made global warming a signature cause. His appraisal: "I don't know if I'm an optimist. I'm a realist."

Body

SAN FRANCISCO — It was a big act, one of the last in the final days of a long political career, and it was about one of his life's passions: safeguarding the environment.

Jerry Brown, 80, the four-term governor of California who is to retire in January, was the principal organizer and reluctant star of the [Global Climate Action Summit](#), a high-octane gathering of lawmakers, executives and scientists working to beat back global warming.

But even as he sought to rally other politicians to the cause, [Governor Brown's conference](#) underscored the limits of what politicians can do to avert the most catastrophic effects of climate change — even the politician who leads California, the wealthiest state in the country and the world's fifth-largest economy.

"We can spread it, encourage it. I'll try to do that," he said in an interview in his office in the State Capitol in Sacramento. "But at the end of the day, this takes a conversion. It's almost a quasi-religious transformation that has not occurred but must occur. Or the world will pay a very heavy price in life and economic detriment."

Governor Brown has been pummeled from different sides. From the nation's capital have come attacks on California's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. From the activist street have come blistering protests demanding that he halt oil drilling in the state.

Friends say he is anything but optimistic. For a man who has devoted his life to politics, they say, he has also come to understand that incremental political change may not be enough to meet the climate change challenge.

"He has a gloomy instinct about the ability of politics to save us, but he can't help but try," said Orville Schell, a journalist and a biographer of Governor Brown who has known him for more than 40 years. "He has doubts about whether politics is the salvation."

Not just American politics. [Veerabhadran Ramanathan](#), a climate scientist at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, said Governor Brown's doubts stemmed in part from talking to leaders abroad and realizing how far their policies are from making a difference.

"He is pretty pessimistic. He sees these leaders. He talks with them," said Dr. Ramanathan, who worked with Governor Brown on a [state law to ban short-lived pollutants](#) like methane. "He can see the cliff we are all rushing toward."

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Governor Brown's legacy on climate change is shaped by California's peculiarities. The state was built on extractive industries like coal and oil, even as it has pioneered some of the world's most ambitious measures on pollution and conservation. California has long encouraged alternative energy, and yet it is tethered to cars. Of the 10 most polluted cities in the country, eight are in California, [according to the American Lung Association](#). Oil wells dot some of the poorest areas of the state.

Governor Brown trained to be a Jesuit priest. But he ultimately followed the footsteps of his father, Pat Brown, becoming, like him, a governor of California, first in 1975 for two consecutive terms, and then again in 2011 for another two terms.

Environmental protection has long been a signature issue. He was known for being spartan in his personal life, embodying a 1970s ethos of "small is beautiful." In his early days as governor, futurists were invited to give talks at the statehouse. Air quality was a campaign pitch in the mid-1970s. He was an early proponent of solar power.

Once, in 1980, in one of his three presidential bids, he told a student journalist that, one day, people would be making phone calls from their wristwatches.

That student journalist was Bill McKibben, who went on to become an environmental writer and, later, the founder of an activist group called 350.org. "He is a visionary guy," Mr. McKibben said.

Mr. McKibben is now a prominent thorn in Governor Brown's side. He wants the governor to stop oil drilling in the state. I spotted him smiling and strolling through a noisy protest that [briefly blocked one entrance](#) to the climate conference on Thursday.

"He's done a good job addressing the demand side," Mr. McKibben said over the din of drumbeats, adding that now, at the end of his fourth term, is Governor Brown's best chance to curtail the supply side by stopping oil production in the state. "The governor is in an unparalleled position to do something about it, and he never has to run for re-election again. There are very few moments in American politics when you get a free shot."

Patricia de Lille, a veteran politician and the mayor of Cape Town who was attending the conference, is no stranger to protests. "My advice to Governor Brown is to engage," she said. "I deal with protests every day. At least these are peaceful."

Governor Brown has taken [an aggressive posture against the White House](#) on climate change, helping to lead an alliance of states, cities and businesses vowing to uphold the commitments of the Paris accord even though President Trump has said the United States will exit.

California has also led a coalition of American states [suing the Trump administration](#) over auto emissions rules. At the conference, Governor Brown missed no chance to excoriate the White House, describing Mr. Trump at one point as "liar, criminal, fool. Pick your choice."

Governor Brown has sought to use state law to curtail demand for oil and gas, but he also tasked his administration to look into how to tackle oil production in the state, the chairwoman of the state's air resources board, Mary D. Nichols, said.

He set a [target of five million electric cars](#) on the road by 2030. He rallied Republicans in his state to [support a cap-and-trade](#) program. And just days before his climate meeting began last week, he signed into law a bill that mandates [100 percent carbon-free electricity](#) in the state by 2045.

As for oil drilling in the state, he said production had declined during his tenure. To suspend drilling in his state, as his detractors demand, he said, would do nothing to curb production in other places like Saudi Arabia.

"We either do nothing and smoke marijuana because it's legalized, or we put our shoulder to the plow and do everything we can," he said. "I don't know if I'm an optimist. I'm a realist."

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Governor Brown sat at the head of a long table in a dark room, lit only by the afternoon light mottled by trees out front. He didn't much look at the pile of notes in front of him. His interview with me was one of 23 scheduled back-to-back that afternoon.

His own age was very much on his mind. "I feel the pressure of being 80. I think, 'How many more years before I'm senile, sick and drooling?'" he said. "That's real. O.K.?"

He said he would keep focusing on climate change after he leaves the Statehouse in January, though he wasn't sure exactly how. Ms. Nichols, who has worked with him for decades, said she wouldn't be surprised if he used his influence to work with those working on the front lines of climate solutions. "He is not resting on his laurels or being the guardian of his own history, though he is a history-minded individual," she said.

PHOTO: Gov. Jerry Brown of California is still working on climate issues. "I feel the pressure of being 80," he said. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Rich Pedroncelli/Associated Press FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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